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AUTHOR Zeece, Pauline Davey; Corr, Marcia
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ABSTRACT

Functions of group time in early childhood programs are discussed and steps to leading a successful group time are described. Group time gathers children at transition time, stimulates thinking and introduces concepts, develops listening skills, fosters social development, nurtures emotional growth, and develops a sense of community and a joy of living. Steps to leading group time successfully include: (1) achieve children's attention; (2) define spaces within the group; (3) vary the pace and kind of activities; and (4) provide closure. Concluding remarks suggest that use of effective group time strategies may provide one of the most stimulating and diverse teaching systems for adults working with young children. (RH)

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Group Time Techniques: Implications for Learning

Pauline Davey Zeece[1]

and

Marcia Corr

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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[1]Person to whom all correspondence should be addressed:
151 Child Development Laboratory
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68583-0830
(402) 472-1674

RUNNING HEAD: Group Time Techniques

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful group times have been a hallmark of quality in early childhood programs for years. Stimulating group times presents a multiplicity of advantages for teachers and caregivers, as well as young children. Development of appropriate group time activities enables adults to monitor children's skills and enjoy their on-going growth (Cazden, 1981). These activities also may set the stage for a wealth of activities as young children grow and learn in all areas of their development (Bredekamp, 1986; Genishi, 1986; Kami, 1985).

In addition to bringing organization to children's routines, group times foster well-being, creative thinking skills, and cognitive development (Nicosea, Willoughby, & Hatcher, 1985). Often times teachers and caregivers of young children coordinate group time activities with on-going themes or units. Fingerplays, flannel board stories, and books are used to teach children about everything from fall to farming and from community helpers to faraway customs.

This central focus on group time content may obscure the importance of setting group time goals. Yet when teachers or caregivers plan not only **what** they will be doing (content), but **why** they will be doing it (goals), group time becomes a conduit through which a variety of exciting planned learning opportunities may be channeled (Gottfried, 1985).

PRIMARY GOALS OF GROUP TIME ACTIVITIES

Group time gathers children at transition times. Whether at the beginning, at the end, or various times between, gathering for group time adds an element of order to help children learn to anticipate and plan. Children are provided opportunities to learn about upcoming plans and choose accordingly. When they know what is happening next, children experience a greater sense of control over their environment (Marion, 1984). This is especially important because self-control is relatively absent during the early preschool years.

Very young children may lack logical organizational or deliberate planning skills (Maccoby, 1980). By the end of the preschool years, older preschoolers are better equipped to exercise self-control and reflect on the consequences of their own actions (O'Brien, 1988). Well planned group times provide children a sense of focus and commitment to activities, as well as a behavior management tool.

Group time stimulates thinking and introduce concepts. For toddlers and young preschoolers, representational thought emerges through developing concepts and spoken vocabulary. Preschoolers progress from observing and describing events to attempting explanations (Richardson, 1988). Group time activities offer an effective means of stimulating interest in language within a social setting.

Activities involving shapes, colors, numbers, opposites, the senses, relationships, and classifications are exciting and educational when learned with others. Learning new vocabulary

through stories, songs, and conversation facilitates the understanding of words in different contexts. By learning to connect words and images, children expand their understanding of the world as they expand their vocabularies.

Group times develops listening skills. Learning to listen to others is a valuable lifetime skill. Toddlers do not easily respond to each others' specific verbalizations (Bronson, 1981); their ability to listen is often overshadowed by their need to talk. By the preschool years, children's increasing mastery of oral language allows interactions of highly coordinated verbal exchange (Mueller & Lucas, 1975).

Thus, group time not only fosters the notion that listening is "fun", but also that it is useful. Additional skills in following directions, auditory and visual discrimination, and social awareness are gained through learning to be attentive at group time.

Group time fosters social development. Young children's socialization is enhanced when they are allowed to fantasize within the context of the subculture of childhood. Social competence is encouraged when children are led on imaginary journeys, add their own ideas to storymaking, and relate current to past experiences.

Toddlers and young preschoolers generally engage in object-centered play which focuses primarily on a common interest (Stroufe & Cooper, 1988). Older preschoolers extend this interest to new people, especially peers. This interest can be manifested in a child's tone of voice, body posture, and facial

expression. All these may be delightfully manipulated in a flexible group time activity

Additionally, a sense of cooperation is fostered as young children learn to be leaders, as well as followers. As these kinds of experiences are afforded during group time, children learn from each other, as well as from adults.

Group time nurtures emotional growth. Group time creates an ideal setting in which to offer emotionally tenuous toddlers psychological contact and comfort through exchanges of words, smiles, and looks. Group time can be a mechanism by which an apprehensive youngster learns that it is really all right to sit and watch and still be part of the group.

As children become older or more comfortable within the group setting, an emerging interest in fantasy enables them to develop a sense of control through group participation. Stepping into the world of creative group time activities permits the relatively powerless child the opportunity to master his or her environment. This sense of power can then be translated into a feeling of security. Group time activities may also facilitate group resolution of conflicts and development of alternative responses to unacceptable behaviors (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, 1982).

Group time develops a sense of community and a joy of living. As children in this country spend decreasing amounts of time at home and increasing amounts of time in the care of others, opportunities which foster belonging become crucial. Children learn about their own importance and worth by the place

that is made for them in all the settings which affect their lives. Group times which make children feel welcome and important in developmentally appropriate ways give the very clear message "You are valuable to us - you belong here" (Yarrow, Scott, & Waxler, 1973).

With all of these primary goals in mind, teachers and caregivers can relate activities to specific objectives through the use of a variety of ideas and materials. Goals can then be achieved through utilization of an effective group time format.

Despite the opportunities for creative adventures within the group time setting, group time activities are most successful when they are organized around an identifiable format. Certain elements must exist within the structure of the group time to maintain the adult's sense of control, while encouraging the child's sense of spontaneity. The teacher or caregiver must be resourceful to allow the flexibility required within this suggested format. A wide variety of teaching styles are adaptable to the following four step group time plan.

STEPS TO LEADING A SUCCESSFUL GROUP TIME

Step 1. Achieve children's attention.

Successful group times ideally begin with all children listening and ready to participate. However, children and adults are rarely ready to begin an activity at the same moment. Young listeners can be attracted to a group time unobtrusively. This can be accomplished positively by singing a direction or starting an activity which draws children to the meeting place.

The adult may dim a light, play a familiar tune, sing a direction, start an animated story or other irresistible activity. Many teachers or caregivers crate an original tune or piggyback a familiar melody such as:

(Tune: Farmer In The Dell)
Meet me on the rug.
Oh meet me on the rug.
Hi, ho the Derry oh.
Meet me on the rug.

Repetition of the song or activity may entice the children to gather. Additional changing of lyrics may increase the focus of the activity when implemented as follows:

Clap your hands like this.
Clap your hands like this
Clap your hands with all your friends
And meet me on the rug.

(Subsequent verses might include:
Stomp your fee like this or
Blink your eyes like this).

By doing an inviting activity of this nature, teachers or caregivers are able to draw children's attention quickly. This is more positive for all than if the adult demands "when you are all quiet, we will begin!".

Sometimes the group comes to the meeting area excited and noisy. A quieting fingerplay works wonders:

I wiggle my fingers.
I wiggle my toes.
I wiggle my shoulders.
I wiggle my nose.

And now all the wiggles
Are gone out of me.
And I sit here so still
As quiet as can be.

Here is another favorite:

I have ten little fingers
And they all belong to me.
I can make them do things
Would you like to see?

I can jump them up high.
I can jump them down low.
I can fold them together
And hold them just so. (in lap)

Step 2. Define spaces within the group

It is helpful for all children involved in group time to have their own space whether tangibly or intangibly defined. Some adults have children use small rugs or carpet squares. Others ask children to pretend they have squeezed a spot of glue or built a magical chair. Techniques for defining spaces are limited only by the imaginations of the children and adults involved in the group time. Creativity blossoms as children are encouraged to share their special techniques for defining their own spaces.

One spaces are defined, it is useful to determine if all children appear comfortable in their spots. This check can prevent potential conflicts that may fragment the group time experience. If a congested or problem area is detected, children might be given choices, rather than commands: "Brad, you look crowded

in your space. Would you like to move over here closer to me or next to Susie?"

Children tend to respond positively when they feel suggestions or directions are given with respect for their well-being. It is most effective when choice is given, choice is honored. If a child is asked: "Benny, do you want to move? Your space looks crowded", a real choice is implied and a child might say NO! If a specific change is definitely warranted, it is better not to offer that kind of choice.

Adults' assessment of children's comfort within their assigned spaces should continue throughout the group time activity. This must be accomplished subtly since too much overt attention to changing spaces may be disruptive to the general focus of the group time.

Step 3. Vary the pace and kind of activities.

It is important to introduce a variety of media in group time. Puppets, tape recorders, overhead projectors for shadow adventures, slides, films, child-made videotapes of role playing stories, musical sound cue stories, coffee can theaters, flannel boards, and participatory props for children offer just a few of the enriching means to exciting story times.

If a story is part of the activity, it usually works best early in the group time, following a few fingerplays or songs used as children "settle in". It is crucial that the story is age appropriate. Even an

award-winning book may give children double messages if the adult reading it reflects an attitude of disinterest.

Sharing stories and pictures of everyday life is very attractive to young children. Children learn not only from the content, but from the presentation of materials. An animated description of a trip to the grocery store, coupled with a bag of groceries purchased, may be as enthralling as an elaborate filmstrip. Accompanying strong visuals hold the interests of the very young. The story may also stimulate some follow-up discussion.

Step 4. Bring closure to the group time.

While adults may be able to anticipate the end of the group time by the content or the clock, children may not be aware of these signals. Therefore, it is important for the teacher or caregiver to give children some kind of cue which indicates the group time is coming to an end. Along with this, some direction needs to be given so children know what to do or where to go next. This may be accomplished by saying: "When I sing your name in this song, you may go wash your hands for snack" or "When I name a color that you are wearing, you may get your coat on to go outdoors." Giving a sense of closure and direction can impact significantly on the tone and focus of the next activity.

CONCLUSION

Group times contribute to the quality of interaction young children have with everyone within the early childhood program. Effective group time strategies may be one of the most stimulating and diverse teaching systems adults use with young children. Group times executed in developmentally appropriate ways afford adults who care for and about young children a mechanism by which to teach children to learn, laugh, listen, and love to be part of a larger group. Can you think of a better preparation for adult life?

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